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## **Religious Literacy in the Context of Theology and Religious Studies<sup>1</sup>**

David Ford and Mike Higon

### **Theology and Religious Studies**

‘Theology and Religious Studies’ has become, in the UK, a catch-all phrase for the academic study of religion. Several universities have a ‘Department of Theology and Religious Studies’ (Kings College London, Nottingham, Leeds, Chester, Glasgow, and several others), advocacy for the field is carried out by a body called ‘Theology and Religious Studies UK’ (TRS UK, formerly the Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies, or AUDTRS), and in 2000 representatives of British university departments of divinity, theology, religion, religious studies, biblical studies and various combinations of those terms met under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and agreed on a ‘benchmarking statement’ for the field using the phrase ‘Theology and Religious Studies’ as their heading.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of portions of this chapter were delivered in David Ford’s plenary paper for the 2013 Society for the Study of Theology conference in Nottingham, and in Mike Higon’s paper at the Open University’s conference on ‘Contemporary Religion in Historical Perspective: Engaging Outside Academia’, also in 2013. See also Ford, 2011, ch. 8, ‘New Theology and Religious Studies: Shaping, Teaching and Funding a Field’ pp.148–167; and Ford, Quash and Soskice, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The current version is Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2007.

The document that the QAA process produced showed the great variety in the field but also the mutual recognition among different types of department and approach. For some who took part in the process of consultation it felt like the ‘coming of age’ of a new paradigm, of theology *with* religious studies, which had been slowly worked out over many years. As one summary noted: ‘There is less tension between the disciplines in Britain than there is elsewhere’ (Ross, 2007).

Nevertheless, the phrase ‘Theology and Religious Studies’ is sometimes still taken to paper over a strong contrast. On one side of the contrast, ‘theology’ might be said to assume the faith of the person doing the studying, while ‘religious studies’ might be said to bracket the student’s faith or lack of faith, and to be a self-consciously neutral discipline. Or ‘theology’ might be said to be the internal discourse of a specific religious community, properly at home in that community’s seminaries, while ‘religious studies’ is a discourse belonging to the public at large, properly at home in a secular university. Or theology might be said to be about God, while religious studies is about the practices and beliefs of religious people.<sup>3</sup> These contrasts are sometimes summarised by saying that theology is ‘confessional’ while religious studies is ‘non-confessional’. Indeed, the two sides sometimes seem to be thought to be united only by their focus on questionable objects of study, with theology only making sense as an academic discipline if one assumes the existence of God, and religious studies only making sense as an academic discipline if one assumes that ‘religion’ is a well-formed category.

In recent years in the UK, however, it has become possible to construe the relationship between theology and religious studies rather differently, and at the same time

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<sup>3</sup> A glance at the Wikipedia pages for both ‘Theology’ and ‘Religious Studies’ and their edit histories (at least up to 23 September 2013) provides some evidence that this is a popular and resilient way of dividing the territory.

to see more clearly the role that theology might play alongside religious studies in advancing a religious literacy agenda. That is, it has become possible to see more clearly the role that theology might play alongside religious studies in providing a whole variety of learners with the forms of knowledge and understanding, the practices of engagement, that might enable them to navigate a complexly religious and secular landscape. In this chapter we will set out something of this construal of the relationship between theology and religious studies, and of the contribution that theology can play alongside religious studies to a religious literacy agenda, and then say something about the institutional locations in which theology and religious studies appear to be flourishing together.

We are going to focus primarily on Christianity. Even if religious studies might typically be defined in a similar way regardless of the religious community or tradition being studied, the nature of 'theology' is harder to generalise. There are discourses whose relationship to other religious traditions is analogous to the Christian theology's relationship to Christianity, but the analogies can't be assumed without further investigation to be drawn tightly enough to allow our arguments to walk lightly across them. The practices of reasoning, the social location of those practices, the materials upon which they draw, and the effects that they might have differ markedly from case to case. We will therefore talk about Christianity, about Christian theology, about religious studies insofar as it takes Christianity as its subject matter, and about 'the churches' as a way of naming a range of Christian communities and traditions that might be the focus of such study. Far more space would be needed to do justice to other traditions, but we are confident, based on experience of what happens in settings where a theology and religious studies approach has had time to mature, that analogous positions to that we propose in relation to Christian theology can be maintained convincingly with regard to other

religions. This chapter might be seen as an invitation to develop such positions in relation to religious literacy.

The first step in our argument is to note that, as a matter of fact, Christian theology is an academic discipline undertaken by students and scholars who have a wide variety of relations to Christian belief and practice, from those who would count themselves believers and practitioners to those who would not, with any number of variations and complexities in between. Undertaking academic study in Christian theology certainly does make some demands on what those who undertake it believe, but what it requires first of all is that its students come to believe, at least for the sake of argument, in the existence of Christianity – that is, the existence of a rich and complex weave of communities, traditions, and identities that can be identified as Christian. Beyond that, it requires that they come to believe that, amongst the many Christian forms of life, there are some reasonably prominent strands that have ordered their lives in part by means of sustained and disciplined deliberation about Christian beliefs and practices, and about their bases, interconnections, and implications. It requires that students come to believe that, at least in some cases, these practices of deliberation are discourses within which it is possible to reason, to make and respond to arguments, to adduce evidence, to explain and to question. And it requires that they come to believe that the outcome of those patterns of reasoning has had and still can have some purchase in ordering the life of that community, if the reasoning is carried out in the appropriate locations and forms. Finally, it requires of students that they come to believe that, at least in some cases, these community-shaping, argument-sustaining, belief-focused practices of deliberation cannot wholly be reduced to other discourses: they have their own solidity and integrity, and can bear assiduous and serious attention.

If all this is true, then students can learn to *follow* such distinctive Christian practices of deliberation, to learn the kinds of moves by which they proceed, and to discover how they have been and how they might be deployed, in forms recognisable to members of the community in question, as contributions to that community's own conversations. Students can, in other words, learn about Christian reasoning by learning to reason Christianly.

### **Theology and Public Argument**

If we ask what place such learning might have in a secular university context, the first answer will simply be that the communities in question, the churches, are a significant part of the world that we share, with an estimated two billion or so members worldwide. They make a public difference, and the difference that they make is affected by the practices of deliberation that they sustain. A university promoting the varied forms of literacy that will enable students to understand and navigate the world well will of course want to pay disciplined attention to the discourses that shape it, to explore and test them. If it is interested in promoting better quality public argument, it will of course be interested in bringing more fully into public argument the reasons people have for their forms of public participation. Such a university therefore *has* to be interested in theological discourses; it has to be interested in understanding those discourses in their own terms; it has to be interested in understanding the arguments that can and cannot be mounted in them, and in understanding what possibilities of development those discourses do and do not possess. None of that requires a stance of faith; none of it requires belief in God – but it does involve serious attention to a discourse developed and sustained by those who do so believe.

Without such attention, there can be a tendency for reference to religious belief in public life to be an argument stopper. If one looks, say, at media commentary on a neuralgic topic like the religious right's attitudes to abortion, quite a lot of it appears to assume that, because various forms of opposition to abortion are based on religious conviction, they are therefore inevitably *undiscussable*; they are erratic boulders that simply have to be navigated around. Yet if those forms of opposition are indeed based on religious conviction, that will often actually mean that they are supported by an argumentative structure – even if it will probably not be an argumentative structure that rests only on axioms that all rational people are likely to share (but on ethical matters how many such axioms are there?). And in at least some Christian contexts, these forms of opposition are genuinely supported by that structure, such that alterations in that structure would affect the stance members of the relevant religious community take in public.

In some contexts, of course, the kind of argument in play in a Christian community might appear to allow little scope for engagement. It might appear to run: 'The Bible says "Don't do this!"; the Bible is authoritative guide for all right belief and conduct; therefore we will not do this and will seek to prevent other people doing this.' But the reason for picking abortion as an example above is that even this stock example of an adamant public stance struck by conservative Christians turns out to be much more complex than that, not least because there are hardly any straightforwardly relevant biblical materials to which appeal can be made.

Far from stopping with the discovery of religious convictions, a theological investigation will be committed to digging deeper, and uncovering the kinds of argument that can underpin such a stance, uncovering the arguments that underpin the stances of Christians who argue differently on this matter, uncovering the ways in which Christians who disagree about this might reason with one another, and uncovering the deep

assumptions and the patterns of evidence involved in their arguments. Discovering that religious convictions in play in some public controversy can, far from being an argument stopper, be a doorway into a whole world of argument and deliberation. And it is only by exploration of the arguments involved that one can understand not only the public stance of religious persons, but the forms of malleability, the forms of responsiveness, that are built into those stances in their own terms, and so what it might take for them to change.

Just because the arguments explored are Christian arguments, and do not necessarily rest on axioms shared with those of other traditions, does not mean that understanding them has nothing to contribute to public argument – argument across and between traditions. To understand this point more clearly, it is worth considering a rather different example. Both of us have an interest in thinking theologically about the purpose and the health of universities, including of secular universities (see Ford, 2007a, ch. 9; Ford, 2007b; Highton, 2012). We participate in the life of such universities, alongside many others who are shaped by multiple different traditions, religious and secular – but we are aware that our participation, and our vision of what is and could be good about university life, is shaped by our Christian theological commitments. Part of the task of public participation, for us, is to become *articulate* about that – to find ways of explaining the commitments and the practices of reasoning that underpin our contributions to university life. That doesn't mean that we will necessarily be able to trace the routes by which our ideas about university life arose psychologically or sociologically, but we do hope aptly to describe the way in which we now make sense of those ideas in the light of our tradition.

What kind of conversation does this enable, however, with someone who does not share our religious commitments? However valid the arguments that we make from those commitments to our conclusions, it cannot compel agreement from someone who does not share them. That does not mean, however, that the only option is to accept that the matter



is beyond reasoned argument, nor that the non-Christian's response can only take the form of a simple comparison between her views and ours or a purely pragmatic agreement that takes disagreement for granted, unargued, and simply looks for overlaps big enough to build shared projects on.

Rather, if we have succeeded in articulating the argumentative structure within which our ideas about university life now sit, others can *experiment* with that structure – they can learn, in the sense set out above, to follow the kinds of argument we use, and to deploy them in ways that they hope will be recognisable to us. So, they can argue with us about what really follows from the commitments we have identified as basic. They can see whether they can argue on our grounds towards something closer to what they want to say about academic life. They can ask us what, on our grounds, we can say about various aspects of academic life that we have not covered, and try to provoke us to envy by expounding the things that they can say about those things within their tradition of argument.

Such discussion can have many possible results. It might lead to our changing our minds about the nature of university life; it might lead to our significantly extending the area within which our conclusions about academic life resemble those of our conversation partners. It might, on the other hand, lead to our understanding more deeply the nature of our disagreement with them, and so the limits upon our possible cooperation. And it can (and almost certainly will) lead to everyone involved amending their articulations. They were only *attempts* at articulacy in the first place, and it is hard to imagine a serious conversation that would not show us routes to better articulations: more faithful identification of our commitments, more careful explanation of how those commitments relate to questions about academic life, more precise delineations of the limits and uncertainties of our conclusions about that life. In other words, this process of arguing can

lead to the securing of extended agreement, to richer and more interesting disagreement, and to deeper mutual understanding and deeper self-understanding – and on the basis of all that, to the discovery of new patterns of shared and unshared action, a new shape of academic life together.

Such public argument does not require us all to stick to the argumentative territory marked out by the axioms we happen to share. Rather, it involves members of various traditions of argument learning each other's languages well enough to experiment in them, to speak recognisably in them – becoming *literate* in them. Religious literacy properly includes Christian theology, and analogous discourses in other traditions.

There is one more thing to say, however, about the benefits of theological literacy. That literacy can properly be pursued for the sake of deeper and richer relationships between the people involved – deeper understanding of each other's positions and practices of argument, deeper understanding of the differences between them – but it is also pursued for the sake of deeper and richer understanding of the objects about which we reason. And because we are talking about religion, that means a deeper and richer understanding of life, the universe, and everything. After all, as well as the questions that arise *between* the religions, there are questions raised *by* the religions. The traditions of deliberation and argument that we investigate in Christian theology are, in the broadest sense, wisdom traditions; they involve exploring the different possibilities of discernment and action that become visible when the world is seen as the world created and redeemed by the God who raised Jesus and shares his Spirit. One does not need to share the beliefs on which that tradition of reasoning rests to be prompted to think differently by engagement with it. One only needs to be willing to explore and to experiment with the ways of thinking that it makes possible.

## Theology and Description

Theology, in this understanding, is closely related to religious studies, but not identical with it. It is close, because description is central to both approaches – description of the practices and beliefs of religious communities (we might say that our approach to questions raised *between* the religions, and questions raised *by* the religions, begins with questions raised *about* the religions). At the heart of theology, there is a descriptive claim roughly of the form, ‘Christians believe x’ or, better, of the form ‘Christians deliberate and argue about x in such and such a way’ – and theology as a discipline takes off from that description. In particular, theology is interested in the deployment within certain forms of Christianity of claims of the form ‘we believe x, *and therefore ...*’, or ‘we believe x, *because ...*’ – and it is interested in those claims insofar as they genuinely shape Christian life. It has tended to be interested in these claims insofar as they appear within the more-or-less official teaching processes of churches, in the education of ministers, in intra- and inter-denominational debates about controversial practice, and with the extended conduct of such teaching and debates in various academic contexts, including seminaries and universities. Theology takes off from attentive description of the kinds of deliberation and argument that take place in those contexts – attentive description that borrows from other descriptive disciplines, often from history, but also to an extent (a growing extent) from social anthropology, though it is fair to say that it tends still to be dominated by the careful analysis of *texts* that circulate in these contexts. To the extent that theology is descriptive in this way, one could think of it as a specialist branch of religious studies.

However, theology does not stop with description, even though description is the starter motor for theological investigation. Take, for instance, theology’s relation to history. Academic theologians spend a good deal of time undertaking a certain kind of intellectual history, patiently uncovering some argumentative discourse that has shaped

Christian communities, or circulated amongst those seeking to shape those communities. Historical investigation uncovers the vocabulary in play, the moves made, in those deliberations and debates – and the theologian is undertaking a specialist form of historical investigation whilst he or she pursues this. But theologians then take a turn likely to irritate historians: they take the discourse they have uncovered, and after asking, ‘What *was* done with this, and how, and why?’ they ask ‘What *can be* done with this?’ What ways of thinking does it make possible? How might it be possible to use these forms of deliberation and argument creatively?<sup>4</sup>

There is certainly a distinction here between theology and religious studies, but it is not (or need not be) an opposition.<sup>5</sup> In fact, if our account is right, it means that the fundamental divide in the area of the academic study of religion is not going to be between theology on the one hand and religious studies on the other – but between theology *with*

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<sup>4</sup> Matters are made still more complex that the discourse being explored might itself encourage or allow various kinds of appeal to history – reference, say, to the history of God’s ways with the world, or to God’s incarnate presence in history – but the rules governing those appeals in the context of this discourse are not necessarily the same as the rules governing *wissenschaftlich* academic history. Nevertheless, the investigation of those appeals – what kinds of appeal are permissible in this discourse, how they work, what might be done with them, how they do relate to other forms of attention to history, including the work of academic historians – are a proper task of the theologian.

<sup>5</sup> There can certainly be something of a tension between religious studies’ tendency to focus on popular practice and belief and theology’s tendency to focus on official discourses, or those that circulate in highly educated circles – but the latter has been significantly qualified by the growth of liberation theology, and of interest in ‘ordinary theology’, and so on.

religious studies on the one hand, grounded as they both are in description, and on the other hand any kind of approach that tries to answer questions about God and other 'big questions' without reference to the life, beliefs and discourses of actual religious communities. For both theology and religious studies, it seems to us that they become less academic, less justifiable as a part of a secular university, and less intellectually respectable, the less they are engaged in detail with the life of particular religious communities.

### **Institutional Contexts**

The proper critical edge of the academic study of Christianity (and other traditions) is not best secured by turning away from engagement with the churches (or other religious communities), nor by adopting a stance of supposed neutrality, but by bringing multiple engagements, multiple perspectives, the discourses of multiple traditions (religious and secular) into conversation with one another. It is theology and religious studies in this engaged and conversational mode that have most to offer to the promotion of rich religious literacy in a plural democracy.

In the remainder of this chapter, we want to glance at a range of institutional settings where the kind of study we have been describing is flourishing, continuing to focus on the theological end of the 'theology and religious studies' spectrum. The first three examples below are all institutions that support forms of Christian theology that are engaged with the churches and yet thoroughly conversational, where descriptive work coexists with the more exploratory, experimental work of constructive theological thinking. These are only three examples, chosen because they illustrate a wide range of possibilities, and because we have first hand knowledge of them; we could easily have chosen a very different (and far longer) list, but they give an initial sense of some of the

locations in which theology and religious studies are making a contribution to religious literacy in the UK today. The fourth and final example, the only one in which we have been employed together, is a programme that has been attempting to contribute directly to the spread of religious literacy from within a theology and religious studies environment.

### *The Society for the Study of Theology*

We start on the conference circuit. The Society for the Study of Theology was established in 1952, and has been running annual conferences on themes in Christian theology ever since. The conferences attract both academics working in theology and related fields, and people with academic expertise and interests working in the Christian churches, from around the UK. The conferences have grown to the point where they normally attract more than two hundred attendees. One of us has been attending annual meetings of the society for nearly forty years, the other for more than twenty, and we have seen it go through several phases – though none, perhaps, is so vibrant as the present. We do not know of another society quite like it, and in part that is because of the society's ways of relating church and academy. A general description might be that the society is hospitable to members of a range of churches and to many academic approaches, and encourages theological discussion between them and about them. It creates a conversational space where differences as well as similarities can be explored through academic discussion, and critical and constructive theological positions put forward. Meetings of the society gather theological thinkers not only from universities and theological colleges or seminaries but also from among those who are in various church ministries and those who are in secular employment – and whilst a willingness to engage seriously with the questions raised by the Christian churches is required of those who attend, there is no restriction on what participants themselves believe or practice.

The society is *de facto* an ecumenical gathering, but it is not a representative gathering where churches are in official dialogue or negotiating their differences, and there is no attempt to reach consensus on the matters discussed. It is, at its best, a venue for intense and argumentative theological conversation, in which the discourses of the churches (past and present) are brought into interaction with one another, with a range of academic disciplines, at the hands of scholars and practitioners and many who live in the overlap between those two circles. There is certainly scope for the widening of its conversations in all these respects, but the liveliness and increasing size of the meetings make it one sign of the vitality of theological exploration in the UK today, and a generator of wider theological literacy.

### ***Durham University***

A very different example is provided by Durham University. Durham is an unashamedly secular, plural institution (see Higton, 2013) that is hospitable to unashamedly Christian academics, students and affiliated bodies. Its Department of Theology and Religion is one among many examples of the flourishing of the UK paradigm of theology and religious studies. The combination of theology and religious studies creates a space where those of different faiths and none can study and think together; and issues of truth and practice, besides those of meaning, description, analysis and explanation, can be addressed both critically and constructively. The questions raised by and between the religions, as well as those raised (in both religious studies and theological modes) about the religions, can be pursued together.

The Department currently has an annual undergraduate intake of around seventy, and a postgraduate population of around 150, but it also works in various ways directly with various churches. This space held open within a secular, plural institution has turned

out to be an attractive one for various churches to be linked into, since it connects their Christian theological concerns with those of other faiths and with many academic disciplines, and is an arena where diverse positions in our multi-religious and secular society can engage with each other. In recent years the Durham department has endowed a professorship in Catholic Theology and developed a Centre for Catholic Studies, and in this and other ways has cultivated partnerships with churches and their institutions – Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist. The Church of England, for instance, has recently awarded Durham the ‘Common Awards’ contract for validating most of the institutions training people for Anglican ministry in England (and for ministry in other churches working in ecumenical partnership alongside them). In 2015, some 1,500 students will be taking Common Awards programmes validated by Durham, and that number is projected to rise above 2,000 over the following two years. (One of us now works as the academic lead on Durham’s activity in this area.) At the same time its academic engagement with other faiths, especially Judaism, has grown, as has its sociology and anthropology of religion, and all within a university that has placed considerable emphasis on the sort of inter-disciplinary work that suits theology and religious studies well. The stated ethos of the department sums up key characteristics of the UK paradigm at its best: ‘We nourish a vibrant community of all faiths and none . . . We aim to lead our students to think rigorously and independently both within and beyond their own traditions, and to train students at all levels to think as researchers.’<sup>6</sup>

As regards church and academy, Durham’s relationship with more than one church is in line with being home to the Receptive Ecumenism movement, one of the most promising Christian ecumenical developments of recent decades (Murray, 2008). Its initiator, Professor Paul Murray, Director of the Centre for Catholic Studies, has

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<sup>6</sup> See the Department’s web page at <https://www.dur.ac.uk/theology.religion/>.



convincingly described the conditions for the Durham developments in terms that are important for this chapter. His key point is that it represents a convergence of factors that have come to maturity. These include the long term partnerships of the university with churches and other bodies; the transformation in the relationship between Catholic theology (especially lay theology) and the public universities in the UK over the past forty years; the more general process of maturation of Christian theology in relation to UK universities, mostly in the context of theology and religious studies; and constructive responses by departments of theology and religious studies to contemporary cultural and religious plurality (Murray, 2013).

### *St Mellitus College*

If the Society for the Study of Theology provides a context where church and academy mix, and if Durham provides an academic context that is hospitable to engagement with the churches, our third example is a church initiative that is hospitable to academic engagement. 2007 saw the foundation of St Mellitus College, combining St Paul's Theological Centre, founded in 2005 by Holy Trinity Brompton Anglican church, and the Church of England Diocese of Chelmsford's North Thames Ministerial Training Course. It is an Anglican initiative that has students and staff from many Christian traditions. It educates Anglican ordinands, church leaders and lay workers in many churches, and independent students interested in theology. It is now (in 2014) training about one hundred Anglican ordinands, and has five hundred people taking courses with it.

Many of its students are full-time and also based in local churches so that their theology can be integrated with their work there, theology and ministry being learned together. In some ways, it might be seen as following through on Holy Trinity Brompton's Alpha Courses that have initiated many into Christian faith, by offering further theological

education at a number of levels, some more academic in character than others. Like Alpha, it has a global horizon for its theological work, with ambitious plans for online and multimedia forms of education that can be accessed around the world, with a special concern for theology in local churches in many countries. St Mellitus College has already built up a well-qualified staff, attracted some leading UK theologians and scholars to give lectures or courses, introduced academic theology to new constituencies, and found funding for rapid development and for buildings.

We would make two points about this development. First, it is a feat of innovative institutional imagination; it is the outcome of complex negotiations, especially between Holy Trinity Brompton and the Dioceses of London and Chelmsford, and is closely related to their London contexts; it has entailed risks of many sorts, from educational and theological (with some in the church having strong reservations about it) to financial; its wisdom-seeking has sought to combine the more academic and the more practical (while, indeed, recognising the dangers of that distinction), and it has tried to relate theology to the arts, the sciences, economics, and many spheres of contemporary life; finally, it has reflected theologically on the ecclesial rationale for what it is doing.<sup>7</sup> Second, the flourishing of St Mellitus and St Paul's is heavily dependent on universities, particularly in this country, and especially on their departments of theology and religious studies, for its staff and lecturers, for some of its students, for the literature studied on its courses, and for

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<sup>7</sup> We are grateful to Dr Graham Tomlin, Dean of St Mellitus and Principal of St Paul's Theological Centre, for sharing a draft paper, 'Theological Education and the Church' containing his latest theological thinking on its rationale. His main points are that the primary home of Christian theology is in the church, that theology and church ministry should be learned together while rooted in a local church, and that theology requires non-competitive partnerships between church and academy.

the general theological climate in which it flourishes.

### *The Cambridge Inter-faith Programme*

Our final example is of how theology and religious studies can directly inspire religious literacy initiatives. The Cambridge Inter-faith Programme, within which both of us have worked, has its home in the Faculty of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, where the main undergraduate and master's courses are in theology and religious studies. That faculty has been shaped by a commitment to three responsibilities, primarily towards academic theology and religious studies, and, through that, towards the religious communities and towards society as a whole. Religious literacy is especially part of the latter concern, and has been pursued mainly through two sets of initiatives.<sup>8</sup>

One is the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, for which Cambridge has been one of the chief centres since it began in the mid-1990s. It has mostly involved studying and discussing in small groups the Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures, with the scriptures of other traditions being increasingly included in some settings.<sup>9</sup> Scriptures are intrinsic to literacy in these traditions, and the practice of joint study and conversation around them contributes to broadening and deepening understanding not only of the scriptures of others but also of one's own. It can also enable forms of collegiality across differences that help in living with long-term problems (of which there are many in the sphere of religions), improving the quality of disagreement. Having begun among

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the Cambridge Inter-faith Programme see [www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk](http://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk).

<sup>9</sup> For example, in the Institute for Comparative Scripture and Interreligious Dialogue in Minzu University of China, Beijing, where Scriptural Reasoning is done with texts of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism; elsewhere Hindu and non-religious wisdom texts are being used.

academics, Scriptural Reasoning is now practised in many local congregational settings, and in schools, prisons, leadership courses, peacemaking projects, festivals, and so on. There have, for instance, been community Scriptural Reasoning groups in recent years in Birmingham, Blackburn, Bolton, Bradford, Dundee, Durham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Kirkby Stephen, London, Manchester, Preston, St Andrews, and York, and the Three Faiths Forum has been running a schools programme that reaches around five thousand students in seventy schools each year. Scriptural Reasoning has flourished best when the connections with the academic practice have been maintained, and so far the main university resources for it have come through departments of theology and religious studies.<sup>10</sup>

The second is a project aiming at creating in London an inter-faith centre, Coexist House, for public education, exhibitions, meetings and events. Five institutions – Cambridge University, the City of London Corporation, the Coexist Foundation, the Inner Temple (one of the Inns of Court where lawyers and judges are educated and based) and the Victoria and Albert Museum – have come together to explore this possibility. At the time of writing it is still in the feasibility study stage, but it has already engaged in religious literacy in several forms, including reaching out to younger generations through festivals and films, building partnerships with cultural and artistic organizations, sponsoring training and learning programmes, and engaging with the Equality and Human Rights Commission, in a partnership led by the Religious Literacy Programme at Goldsmiths,

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<sup>10</sup> In the US the main centre, with doctoral and masters courses in Scriptural Reasoning, has been the Department of Religion in the University of Virginia, which is unusual in being a state university where theology and religious studies come together. For further reading on Scriptural Reasoning see [www.scripturalreasoning.org](http://www.scripturalreasoning.org) and [www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/en/resources/tags?tags=scriptural+reasoning](http://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/en/resources/tags?tags=scriptural+reasoning).

University of London, in order to take conversations on religious literacy into government, the law, the arts, the media, and society at large.

## **Conclusion**

Religious literacy is not simply a matter of learning about the religions. It involves learning patterns of fruitful interaction – engaged, conversational, perhaps argumentative. It involves learning how religious communities argue, and how to join in with those arguments in order to explore agreements and disagreements, and the dynamics by which they can change. It involves engagement with questions raised about, between, by and with the religions.

If this is what real religious literacy involves, then it requires engagement with theology as well as with religious studies – or, better, with theology and religious studies working together, with only a porous and messy boundary between them. And the kind of theology it requires is the kind we have describing: an academic discourse driven by engagement with the life of the churches – and, analogously, with the life of other religious communities too. The good news is that such theology is flourishing in the UK at present, in multiple contexts – and the work being done in those contexts has much to offer to those pursuing a religious literacy agenda.

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